

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Alien invasion: why talking about illegal aliens is harmful and leads to dehumanization, and the role of intellectuals and scientists against stigmatization

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ABSTRACT

The term ‘alien’ is often used in public debates regarding migrants, particularly in the United States of America. This term is not in itself negative, as for example in its neutral legal meaning (transfer of ownership), but tends to acquire detrimental meanings over time. For example, this has already happened in the field of psychiatry, where the term ‘alienated’ to refer to the mentally ill, and that of ‘alienation’ to refer to his condition, acquired a negative connotation conveying an idea of radical difference. One consequence was, on this basis, the justification of the social separation of patients, locked up in mental asylums. The contribution of phenomenological psychopathology, with its insistence on seeing the patient as alter rather than alienus, has led to notable advances in the humanization of care and in favour of the social integration of patients. Similarly, in current discourse on migrants the term ‘alien’ has acquired a negative connotation, to underline a radical difference from the natives, implicitly bringing with it the sense of being less human, and therefore less worthy of our empathy, and therefore less holders of human rights. Furthermore, by placing the word ‘illegal’ next to the word ‘alien’, the negative public opinion is further strengthened, also transmitting the sense of fear that the term ‘illegal’ arouses. This article calls on intellectuals and scientists to reject these terms and to raise awareness among the population about their improper use, with the aim of avoiding the dehumanization and stigmatization of people with the least capacity to defend themselves, such as migrants.

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INTRODUCTION

In difficult times, the fears of the population are often transmitted and diverted towards the fear of minorities. According to Manera (2021),

“In fact, throughout history there have been many different forms of distinction and discrimination, which become forms of racism. Starting from the dynamics of xenophobia known to the ancient world, we arrive at the racialization that in the modern age sees the emergence of the very categories of race, ethnicity and culture. These are conceptual forms of organization of living beings that ‘have served’ to define and build relationships with other subjects, and which in particular take on traits of separation, hatred and violence when directed towards minorities and subordinates.”

Projecting one’s anguish onto others, perceiving them as radically different and intrinsically wrong, becomes a way to feel better, to avoid confronting one’s own defects. Minorities fulfill this function perfectly, also because as a minority they are disadvantaged and are unable to

defend themselves. Language often serves this function using words that emphasize the radical otherness and inherent evil of those who are targeted.

In this article, we will focus on the term ‘alien’, which occupies an important place in the history of psychiatry and which in recent times has been used frequently in the documents of bureaucrats who are supposed to manage migratory flows.

SEMANTICS OF THE TERM ‘ALIEN’

According to the online Cambridge Dictionary, the term alien has three main meanings:

1. Relating to creatures from another planet (synonym: extraterrestrial);
2. Strange and not familiar, as for example the entry in the sentence “When I first went to New York, it all felt very alien to me”;
3. Coming from a different country, race, or group (synonym: foreign).

It derives from the Latin *aliēnus*, in turn derived from *alius* (other) [*ali(us)* ‘other’ + *-ēnus* adjective suffix: Dictionary.com, 2025]. Interestingly, in Latin there are two pronouns for *other*, namely *alius* and *alter*. *Alius* is used to mark the difference and contrast between many, while *alter* is used for the comparison between two (Anonymous, 2025).

Finally, used as a verb (*to alien* or *to alienate*) there are three main meanings:

1. To convert into an alien or stranger (figurate);
2. To transfer the property or ownership of anything;
3. To turn away, go off (Oxford English Dictionary, 2009).

We see from these meanings that *alien* usually refers to something belonging to another one. It may be an object/property belonging to another person, a person belonging to another country/ethnic group, a plant belonging to another environment, a creature belonging to another planet, etc. In all cases, *its function is to mark the difference*. In addition, when used figuratively, it marks estrangement, unfamiliarity, etc. Finally, in Marx the term *alienation* (*Entfremdung*) describes the harmful effects of the capitalist organization of work, which creates a situation in which workers are estranged from their work, their potential and their fellow men, leading to a sense of helplessness and dehumanization (Marx, 1844/1992).

Overall, the term alien is not in itself negative, as for example in its neutral legal meaning, as in the expression ‘to alienate property’, which is a right and a fundamental aspect of ownership (Sahil Khan, 2024). The same is true when it is used to describe the experience of foreignness, especially anthropological-cultural, as for example in the case of the Englishman walking through New York, in a song masterfully sung by Sting. However, in general, it marks *differences* more than comparisons, and in some contexts it takes on a derogatory meaning, being used to emphasize strangeness, diversity, distance, etc. Let’s take the example of nineteenth-century psychiatry, which was not by chance defined as ‘alienism’.

ALIENISTS AND MADNESS

Mental illness entered the heart of modernity with the work of Philippe Pinel (1745-1826), who in 1800 published the first edition of his fundamental and revolutionary treatise ‘*Traité médico-philosophique sur l’aliénation mentale ou la manie*’ [Medico-philosophical treatise on mental alienation or mania] (Pinel, 1800). In this text, he defined psychiatric patients as ‘alienated’. In his book, the terms mental alienation (to refer to mental illness) and alienated (to refer to patients) were used in a neutral and descriptive way, without the intention of conveying

a derogatory meaning. The intent of the book was also far from denigrating; Pinel intended to free the sick from their chains, to recognize their dignity as human beings affected by an illness, to treat them in adequate facilities, privileging the educational aid (which he called ‘moral treatment’). However, even in an enlightened mind like Pinel’s, the implicit idea was that a person suffering from a mental illness is totally different from normal people, from whose life-world he/she is separated drastically and dramatically, being precisely ‘alienated’. Pinel’s innovative ideas imposed themselves on his successors and, with them, also the term ‘alienated’, so much so that all the doctors who studied and treated the mentally ill in the eighteenth century were defined as ‘alienists’. Only gradually, with the advent of the twentieth century, the term alienist was replaced by that of psychiatrist. However, the implicit idea that the mentally ill are totally alien to so-called healthy subjects has remained in force for years. Phenomenological psychopathology has made a significant contribution to overcome this separation, working clinically and conceptually to replace the term ‘alien’ with that of ‘other’, intended as ‘alter ego’.

Drawing on Binswanger, Bruno Callieri recognizes that:

“In truth, in certain psychotic situations, especially those of delusional-paranoid nature, the *alter* presents itself to us as something foreign, as *alienus*, transferred from brother to enemy, that is, moving according to ‘other’ parameters [...] which, *volentes aut nolentes*, leaves us speechless, as we are shocked by the invasion of the anomalous meaning (for example, of ‘the end of the world’) or by the continuous presence of perplexity and, therefore, of delusional illumination and revelation” (Callieri, 1996, p.70).

But then he goes on to say that the psychiatrist must intervene in the relationship, to reduce this distance that at first sight seems unbridgeable.

“If the deprecated, but always tempting attitude of aseptic neutrality, even if benign, remained the only way of experiencing the encounter, every attempt at dia-logue (in its precise etymology) would become impossible and every attempt to recover the *alter* hidden in the *alienus* or submerged by it would be seriously hindered: because this, the recovery of the *alter* (says the philosopher E. Lévinas *que l'autre devienne autrui*), is the authentic therapeutic aim of the psychiatrist.” (Callieri, 1996, p.71)

“I believe that even the most radical alienation, the most closed autism, the most extreme paranoidism, the most unnailed delusion, the most blatant dissociation, the most inadequate excitement, contain within themselves an unstoppable nucleus of *alter*, of *fellow-man*, even if unexpressed, suffocated or radically camouflaged or hidden.” (Callieri, 1996, p.71-72)

According to this author, the clinician must move from the abstractness of theory to the life of the human encounter, to the search for:

“the irreducible singularity of the individual, of the sick person, in his coexistence in the world with his peers [In-der-welt-mit-dasein], the recovery therefore from alienation to alterity” (Callieri, 1989, p.334).

It is also thanks to works like this that it has been possible to contribute to overcoming the distance between ‘sane’ and ‘mad’, allowing the closure of psychiatric asylums in Italy, more humane treatments, access to psychotherapeutic work, up to the current involvement of ‘experts by experience’ in research teams.

As Di Petta writes:

“This psychopathology of the encounter that opened, at the dawn of the twentieth century, the great and revolutionary intersubjective season of psychiatry, can today constitute itself as a consolidated cultural tradition and at the same time an advanced point at the crossroads of knowledge about man. It can collect the ethical mandate to shorten the distance that separates, tearing it, the more diurnal and solar humanity from that other chthonian and nocturnal part, expelled and relegated to madness, thus allowing this divergent humanity, through the recovery of a true culture of *difference*, to recognize its own radical *identity* even in *alterity*.” (Di Petta, 1996, p.74)

In short, modern psychiatry was founded on the idea that the person with mental problems was an *alienus*, whose experience was by definition non-understandable, and hence the idea of treatments with separate spaces and predominantly physical methods, aimed at the body-object (despite Pinel and his emphasis on the role of passions). It is also thanks to phenomenological psychopathology, which brings with it the idea that man is constitutively a being together with others (*mit-Dasein*), that it has been possible to create the mental space to consider the person with mental problems as an *alter* and not as an *alien*. This has made possible an effective fight against stigmatization, a greater acceptance of the suffering person in his social and relational context and the initiation of care projects aimed at the other as a human being.

MIGRANTS AS ILLEGAL ALIENS

In America, the term ‘alien’ has been sporadically used to refer to migrants without pejorative sense. For example, in Article 22(9) of the American Convention on Human Rights (adopted 22 November 1969) it is stated that the “collective expulsion of aliens is prohibited” (Organization of American States, 1969). Here the intention was clearly protective.

At the website of the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, the ICE portal is presented with these words: “This website is for any alien who has been placed in removal proceedings and contains important information for aliens to complete necessary tasks related to the immigration process” (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, 2025). For someone who reads from another country, the first impression is as if the staff responsible of this website are completely unaware of the semantic halo conveyed by the use of the word ‘alien’ in this context. As reported on the website ‘Government Executive’, the current US Secretary of Homeland Security, Kristi Noem, regarding the appointments of high-ranking officials said that they: “are work horses, strong executors and accountable leaders who will lead the men and women of ICE to achieve the American people’s mandate to target, arrest and deport illegal aliens” (Newhouse, 2025). In the U.S. ‘Homeland Security’ website is also reported that “Secretary Kristi Noem announced the Department of Homeland Security will fully enforce the Immigration and Nationality Act, which created multiple tools to track illegal aliens and compel them to leave the country voluntarily. These tools include criminal penalties” (Department of Homeland Security, 2025). This is the same person who smiles proudly in photos with people imprisoned behind bars in the background. No matter how hard we try, it is hard to believe that a person like this, when she speaks about ‘illegal immigrants’, does so in a neutral tone, without wanting to convey negative value judgments. The European Union seems to be more attentive to this aspect, so much so that, when you type in the search engine of its official website, the word ‘alien’ does not appear, while the word ‘immigrant’ does. However, given the current political climate, one wonders whether it is just a matter of time.

Wikipedia briefly describes the entry ‘Illegal alien’, defined as “the statutory and legal term used in some countries for an illegal immigrant or other unauthorized resident” (Wikipedia 2025a), and in the page about ‘Illegal immigration’ reports the following: “It is the migration of people into a country in violation of that country’s immigration laws, or the continuous residence in a country without the legal right to do so. Illegal immigration tends to be financially upward, with migrants moving from poorer to richer countries. Illegal residence in another country creates the risk of detention, deportation, and other imposed sanctions” (Wikipedia 2025b). In the same page, it is interesting that the word ‘illegal aliens’ is mentioned regarding asylum seekers who are denied asylum, apparently without awareness of its possible derogatory use. On the contrary, there is a following ample space dedicated to the possible derogatory use of the term ‘illegal’. In fact, Wikipedia also recalls that in Europe the Platform for International Cooperation on Irregular Migrants has launched the international campaign ‘Words Matter’ to promote the use of the terms *irregular* or *undocumented* migrants instead of *illegal* (PICUM, 2025).

In short, the term ‘illegal aliens’ is increasingly being used to refer to migrants, especially in the United States of America. Perhaps it was initially used in bureaucratic language without any pejorative intent, but in recent times it has been used more and more often and it is difficult to believe that there is no derogatory intent. In the European Union, there is currently a greater emphasis on the use of non-offensive language, so the term ‘alien’ to refer to migrants has not been found in official documents, although one wonders how long this will last.

Since words matter, because if used badly they can lead to discrimination, racism, stigmatization, etc., many have recommended replacing the word ‘illegal’ with that of ‘undocumented’, and even more so one can only recommend replacing the word ‘alien’ with that of ‘immigrant’ or ‘migrant’. Accordingly, administrations should use in official documents ‘undocumented migrants’ instead of ‘illegal aliens’.

At this point, the question to ask is: why do public administrations feel the need to use denigrating terms instead of more neutral terms? One possible answer has to do with the concept of dehumanization and its role in people’s perceptions of the immigration problem. Dehumanization is a psychological process through which another person is seen as non-human or sub-human. It can be directed at a single person (e.g., “That murderer is an animal) or at entire groups (e.g., Jews during the Nazi period). In general, the person subjected to dehumanization is denied full humanity. Extreme forms of dehumanization usually occur during conflicts (e.g. genocides) or in specific situations such as torture sessions. However, dehumanization can also be softer, conveyed through messages that imply that people who are victims of it are somehow less human than others are. This case applies to our discussion of the use of the term ‘illegal aliens’ to define undocumented migrants. By using the words ‘alien’ and ‘illegal’, the implicit message is that they are not like us and do not respect our laws, which implies the concept of possible danger. On the contrary, using the expression ‘undocumented migrants’ would underline that they were not born in our country, but that they arrived here by traveling, and that from an administrative point of view they do not have the correct documents. Put like that, the concept of danger does not immediately come to mind and the idea of travel and movement is a human activity that does not make us feel very different. In other words, certain words increase the dehumanization of the targeted person, simultaneously reducing

empathy and increasing fear towards them. These links are clearly highlighted by a study which shows that the risk of racial shooting is increased by fear of ethnic minorities, and that this effect is stronger when people also dehumanize Black individuals, and weaker when people have high empathy (Mekawi et al., 2016). If this is true for racially motivated killings, it is even more so when it comes to shaping public opinion. The more a minority is dehumanized, the less empathetic the reaction of the rest of the population will be and, consequently, the less outrage there will be if that minority is attacked. Moreover, the more migrants are dehumanized, the less they are seen as human beings with fundamental rights.

From all this arises the suspicion that the use of the term ‘illegal alien’ in the USA is not accidental, but that it is part of a communication strategy aimed at making society more permissive with respect to policies that could undermine the human rights of migrants. Sooner or later we can expect the same thing to happen in Europe, as dehumanizing terms are already part of the political language of many populist and sovereigntist groups.

DISCUSSION

Nowadays the term ‘alien’ is used more and more frequently in public discourse regarding migrants. In itself, this word does not have a negative meaning (for example, the legal meaning related to the transfer of ownership). However, in many contexts it takes on a series of meanings that can become negative, highlighting difference, estrangement, etc.

We have seen that in psychiatry the term ‘alienated’ to refer to the mentally ill, and that of ‘alienation’ to refer to his condition, were originally neutral, but have acquired a negative connotation over time. And this negative connotation has led, with the idea of radical difference conveyed in it, also to the justification of the social separation of these people, locked up in mental asylums. The contribution of phenomenological psychopathology, with its insistence on seeing the patient as *alter* rather than *alienus*, has led to notable advances in the humanization of care and in favor of the social integration of patients.

Similarly, in current discourse on migrants the term ‘alien’ has acquired a negative connotation, to underline the radical difference from the natives. A radical difference that is accentuated to the point of taking on even more negative meanings, implicitly bringing with it the sense of being less human, and therefore less worthy of our empathy, and therefore less holders of human rights. Furthermore, by placing the word ‘illegal’ next to the word ‘alien’, the negative public opinion is further strengthened, also transmitting the sense of fear that the term ‘illegal’ arouses.

As in the example of psychiatry, also in the discourses on migrations a cultural revolution is needed that allows us to see the migrant not as *alienus* but rather as *alter*. Another person like me, different from me because born elsewhere and with a different social and cultural background, and yet similar to me because he too is a human being.

Since words matter, it would be important to denounce the use of the term ‘illegal alien’ by public administrations, to sensitize journalists on this problem and, not entirely obvious, to sensitize scientists and scholars on the importance of using the term ‘undocumented migrant’ in their writings. Indeed, although apparently marginalized in the current public debate, researchers and intellectuals will continue to play an important role in shaping people’s way of thinking.

In this moment of apparent regression of the public discourse in Western culture, it is particularly important for intellectuals and scientists to keep their guard up, using words with care to avoid the dehumanization of people. This is true in general, and even more so for people who do not have enough power to defend their rights, as is increasingly the case today with migrants.

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